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Unexpected Apparitions: European Modernist Haiku as World Literature

During the age of the “historical avant – garde,” the haiku went from being almost unknown in Europe to become a generative literary form for poets writing in a wide range of languages. Far from limiting themselves to exoticist themes, these poets engaged with many of the central issues of modernist poetics and indeed modernity more broadly. My talk will present European haiku written about the First World War as a context for tracking the form’s afterlife in the postwar avant – garde, focusing primarily on French – language poets and critics with some connection to surrealism (Julien Vocance, Pierre Albert – Birot, Paul Eluard, Paul – Louis Couchoud, and Yvan Goll).

Despite the form’s well – known tendency to focus on the here and now of a fleeting moment, these haiku were, I argue, continuously reinscribed in historicizing, nationalizing, and globalizing discourses. The wartime poems, for example, represented – in tone and imagery, but also in their use of scale – a kind of anti – epic, disavowing the epic’s traditional values by attempting to locate history in small moments and anonymous details. More broadly, the European modernist haiku can be productively read in relation to a Lukácsian critical tradition that finds in modernism a confrontation between isolated sensory impressions and a drive toward totality. In sum, the modernist haiku explored the problem of the modernist epic, even the modernist long poem, albeit in the smallest of literary forms. At the same time, critics considered the significance of this “new” form in relation to the historical context of both Japan’s expanding empire and the postwar discourse of European decline, compelling questions about what we would today call world literature, including the question of whose “world” this avant – garde would be for.